

Questions and Answers about the Antelope Valley Complex Wild Horse Gather

Why is the BLM gathering the Antelope Valley herds?

The proposed gather is needed to achieve and maintain the appropriate management level (AML) of wild horses in the Antelope Valley Complex and prevent further deterioration resulting from the current overpopulation within the two herd management areas (HMAs) of the complex in northeastern Nevada. The current wild horse population of 2,705 is about 5.5 times the low range AML of 427 wild horses and about three times the land's full carrying capacity or high range AML of 788 wild horses. (Low range of AML is the minimum herd population level; high range AML is the maximum population level that will help to prevent further deterioration of the range, and achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship.) The foal crop that will arrive in the spring will increase the herd sizes 20-27 percent on average, pushing the herd populations once again over AML within weeks of the gather. The rangelands will continue to worsen and the need to gather to AML will arise again very shortly.

EA/Decision Record Questions

What is the Proposed Action considered in the Final Environmental Assessment (EA)?

The Proposed Action is the removal of excess wild horses, the application of fertility control and the adjustment of sex ratios so that there is a 60 percent male to female sex ratio left in the herds.

Gather Process Questions

What is the Gather process?

In August 2009, an inventory flight was conducted over the Antelope Complex. It was determined that a gather was necessary due to the number of excess wild horses observed. A 60-day scoping letter was sent to interested publics on Dec. 14, 2009 and a follow up press release was made Jan. 13, 2010 to reach a wider audience. In response to a request from In Defense of Animals, a 60-day extension was granted until Feb. 12, 2010. The public scoping period ended Feb. 12, 2010 and another inventory flight was conducted in March 2010. A preliminary Environmental Assessment was issued for a 30-day comment period on Sept. 17, 2010. In October 2010, a final comprehensive inventory was conducted over the entire complex. The comment period ended Oct. 19, 2010 and a final EA was issued on Nov. 30, 2010. The Decision Record was issued on Dec. 17, 2010 with gather operations to begin Jan. 20, 2011.

Where would the BLM gather horses?

The BLM would gather approximately 1,917 to 2,278 excess wild horses from the Antelope Herd Management Area (HMA) which is managed by the Ely District, Schell Field Office, the Antelope Valley, Goshute, and Spruce-Pequot HMAs which are managed by the Elko District, Wells Field Office, and those outside the HMAs.

Description of the Environment.

The area is within the Great Basin geographical region which is one of the largest deserts in the world. The climate is typical of middle latitude, semi-arid lands where evaporation potential exceeds precipitation throughout the year. Precipitation normally ranges from approximately five to seven inches on the valley bottoms to 16 to 18 inches on the mountain peaks. Most of this precipitation comes during the winter months in the form of snow occurring primarily in the winter and spring with the summers

being quite dry. Temperatures range from greater than 90 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer months to minus 15 degrees or colder in the mountains in the winter. The Complex is characterized by long wide valleys and long narrow steep mountain peaks covered with heavy pinyon juniper woodlands. On many of the low hills and ridges that are scattered throughout the area, the soils are underlain by bedrock. Elevations within the Antelope Complex range from approximately 5,000 feet to 10,200 feet.

Will BLM remove all the wild horses that are gathered?

The BLM is gathering more wild horses than it is removing so it can apply fertility control and release the appropriate proportions of males to females to achieve a sex ratio that is 60 percent males to 40 percent females in the herds. Therefore, the goal is to gather approximately 2,278 wild horses, but, if more are gathered, selective removal criteria would be used to return horses to the range. The actual number of wild horses removed will depend on the overall success of the gather operations, but we have an overall post-gather target population of approximately 427 wild horses that would remain within the Complex.

The Proposed Action provides for the following:

- gather a sufficient number of the total estimated population of 2,705 wild horses (This number includes the 2010 foals. Since most of the foals during this gather will be weaned by January they are counted towards AML for this gather.), (2) selectively remove approximately 1,867-2,228 excess wild horses from within the HMAs and approximately 50 from outside the Goshute and Spruce-Pequop HMAs for an approximate total of 1,917-2,278 excess wild horses, and (3) apply two year fertility control to any mares released back to HMA (approximately 214 mares) and/or adjust the sex ratio to 60 percent males and 40 percent females within the Antelope Complex.

Does the BLM use fertility control?

Yes, the BLM has promoted and supported the development of an effective contraceptive agent for wild horses since 1978. The most promising agent is a Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP-22) vaccine that was developed in the 1990s, but is not commercially available. The PZP vaccine is used by BLM in cooperation with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) under a research protocol.

How are fertility control and adjusting the sex ratio implemented?

Fertility control treatments and modification of sex ratios of released animals would slow population growth and could increase the time period before another gather would be required. If the gather efficiency exceeds 85 percent (2,299 head) then the following management actions would be implemented to the degree possible while still achieving the low range AML:

- All mares selected for release, including those previously treated with fertility control, would be treated/retreated with a two-year Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP-22) or similar vaccine and released back to the range. Immuno-contraceptive treatment would be conducted in accordance with the approved standard operating and post-treatment monitoring procedures. Mares would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.
- Studs released would be selected to increase the post-gather sex ratio to approximately 60 percent studs in the remaining herds. Studs would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.

Both mares and studs would be removed using a selective removal strategy to the extent possible.

Selective removal criteria include:

- (1) First Priority: Age Class - Five Years and Younger
- (2) Second Priority: Age Class - Six to Fifteen Years Old
- (3) Third Priority: Age Class Sixteen Years and Older

Post-gather, every effort would be made to return released wild horses to the same general area from which they were gathered.

How does the BLM gather horses?

The BLM uses a Federal gather contractor to gather wild horses from HMAs where the BLM has determined that excess animals exist. The contractor uses a helicopter to locate and herd horses towards a set of corrals where the horses are gathered. The helicopter is assisted by a ground crew and the use of a Prada, a domesticated horse, to move the excess wild horses into the corrals. If needed, the ground crew may assist the helicopter by roping the wild horses from horseback.

Why does the BLM use helicopters to gather wild horses – isn't that inhumane?

The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, as amended, authorizes the BLM and the Forest Service to use helicopters to gather animals, as well as motorized vehicles to transport gathered animals. The use of helicopters and motorized vehicles has proven to be a safe, effective, and practical means for the gather and removal of excess wild horses and burros from the range. This is demonstrated by the gather of nearly 25,000 wild horses and burros during fiscal years (FY) 2004-2008 with a mortality rate of less than one half of one percent.

A study was conducted recently by four independent, credentialed equine professionals who were selected by the Washington, D.C.-based American Horse Protection Association, whose mission is to protect and preserve wild horses and burros on U.S. public rangelands. The full report, accessible at the BLM's national Website (www.blm.gov), made several observations and findings, including the observation that, in general, "horses did not exhibit undue stress or show signs of extreme sweating or duress due to the helicopter portion of the gather, maintaining a trot or canter gait only as they entered the wings of the trap. Rather, horses showed more anxiety once they were closed in the pens in close quarters; however, given time to settle, most of the horses engaged in normal behavior...." The report also favorably noted the helicopter's "precision" in gathering wild horses and burros, comparing it to "a dog working sheep."

Though the wild horses experience a heightened stress level for the short period of time that the helicopter is herding the animals towards the gather corrals, animals calm down quite quickly afterwards. Helicopter gathers require a third to half the time of traditional water or horseback trapping methods.

Other methods of gathering wild horses on horseback or water trapping can be effective in small gathers and in confined spaces, but they are not nearly as efficient as helicopter gathers. Water trapping can be very effective when water resources are scarce but nearly impossible otherwise. Also, this method is very time consuming.

Using horseback riders to herd the horses into gather corrals is very difficult in large open areas of public lands. This practice is very hard on the domestic horses and the riders; both have a high likelihood of being hurt. This method is very inefficient and takes an enormous amount of time to complete.

Does the public have input regarding the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles in managing wild horses and burros?

Yes, Section 9 of the 1971 Act, requires that a public hearing be held prior to the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles. Hearings are held annually. The purpose of the hearings is to hear public concerns so that BLM can review its Standard Operating Procedures to assure animals are treated humanely. The BLM Elko District Office held a public hearing on July 1, 2010. BLM reviewed its Standard Operating Procedures in response to the views and issues raised at that public meeting and determined that no changes to the SOPs were warranted.

Why is this herd being gathered in the winter?

Winter gathers in this area are preferred as foals are older and wild horses are located at lower elevations, reducing the travel distance to the trap site. Oftentimes, wild horses are located at the highest elevations during the summer months, and therefore, would have to travel over steep terrain to the trap sites. Dense tree cover further increases the difficulty of gathering wild horses during summer months.

The terrain is also rocky, and past experience indicates that fewer injuries to hooves and legs occur during winter gathers in this area. Winter gathers typically result in less stress to wild horses as the cold and snow does not affect horses during the gather to the degree that heat and dust would during summer gathers.

Is this an emergency action?

It is not currently, but could become, due to limited forage and water resources. If this population management action is not completed in the near future, the likelihood of an emergency situation increases due to limited forage and reduced summer water availability caused by excess wild horses, drought conditions and/or severe weather.

How many horses would be removed?

The proposal is to remove approximately 2,278 excess wild horses from the Antelope Valley Complex. A population of approximately 427 wild horses will remain on the range, which is within the appropriate management level established for this area.

What happens to the horses that don't go back to the range?

The excess wild horses will be transported to either the Salt Lake City Facility, Gunnison Correctional Facility in Gunnison, Utah, Palomino Valley Center near Reno, Nev., or the Indian Lakes Road Facility in Fallon, Nev. where they will be prepared for the BLM adoption program or for long-term holding. They will be checked by a veterinarian and receive vaccinations and freeze marks. We are not sure when these particular wild horses will be available for adoption, but the Palomino Valley Center is full to capacity with horses available for adoption right now.

Currently there are more than 30,000 wild horses and burros maintained at short and long-term holding facilities and pastures. In the case of long-term holding pastures, unadopted and unsold horses live out the rest of their lives in these grassy prairie-land areas of the Midwest, and are cared for by contractors. New contracts for long-term holding pastures will allow an additional 8,000 head to be cared for in long-term holding pastures, and these pastures will become available in the next couple of months to accommodate the horses gathered in Antelope Valley Complex and from other gathers. Animals are held between 10 and 25 years depending on their age when they enter lifetime holding. In contrast, only a small percentage of wild horses roaming public rangelands live past the age of 15 because of the harsher living conditions.

Population Questions

What is the current population of the herd?

The current population of 2,705 wild horses for the Antelope Valley is based on an aerial census completed in October 2010. The current population is about 5.5 times the low range of the AML (427 head) or about three times over the high range AML of 788 head which is the maximum level at which a thriving natural ecological balance can be maintained.

Why doesn't the BLM gather to the high range of AML?

The foal crop that will arrive in the spring will increase the herd sizes 20-27 percent on average, pushing the herd populations once again over AML within weeks of the gather. The rangelands will continue to worsen and the need to gather to AML will arise again very shortly.

Contractor Questions

How does the BLM select its gather contractors?

The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded in 2010 following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review was evaluation of the prospective contractor's knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle wild horses and burros in a safe, effective and humane manner. The BLM's contractors have demonstrated the knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle these animals safely, effectively and humanely.

Range/Grazing Questions

How does the BLM determine if the range has deteriorated – is there sound science involved?

Yes, the BLM conducts monitoring of public lands for vegetation condition, forage and water availability and wildlife habitat condition. Riparian assessments, utilization monitoring and trend data indicate excessive wild horse use is contributing to degradation of rangeland resources including damage to water sources, riparian areas (these are water sources such as stream and creek banks, seeps) and overutilization of forage at higher elevations. The Proposed Action is consistent with maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance between wild horse and burro populations, wildlife, livestock and vegetation, and to protect the range from the deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild horses and burros.

For decades, the BLM has hired rangeland management specialists, wildlife biologists, as well as wild horse and burro specialists, whose expertise is used to monitor and assess rangeland conditions on public lands.

What are the drought conditions like in this area?

The West has been in a drought for more than a decade. In the Great Basin high desert of Nevada, where the Complex is located, precipitation normally ranges from approximately five to seven inches on the valley bottoms to 16 to 18 inches on the mountain peaks.

Is there livestock grazing in this area?

Yes, there are 31 allotments in the Antelope Complex. However, the permittees have voluntarily reduced their use based on dry conditions, drought, limited forage, wild horse numbers in excess of AML and wild horse impacts to existing water projects or water sources.

Does wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?

BLM special status species that inhabit the Antelope Complex include the Columbian spotted frog and the greater sage-grouse. Other non-sensitive wildlife species that have been documented within the Complex are owls, falcons, hawks, golden eagles who have been documented as year-round residents and bald eagles, who are winter foragers.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure. Continuous grazing does not allow plants sufficient time to recover from grazing impacts. Such overgrazing results in reduced plant health, vigor, reproduction, and ultimately to a loss of native forage species from natural plant communities. Over time, this greatly diminishes habitat quality as abundance and long-term production of desired plant communities is

compromised. If wild horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

Why don't you just make more land available to the horses?

The BLM would need approval from Congress to expand herd areas for wild horses. By law, wild horses can only be managed on areas of public lands where they were known to exist in 1971, at the time of the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Adoption Question

How can I adopt one of the horses?

The excess wild horses and burros removed from the range are offered for adoption to qualified people through the BLM's Adopt a Wild Horse or Burro Program. Potential adopters must have the proper facilities and financial means to care for an adopted animal, and we always hope that they have experience working with a wild horse or burro, which will help ensure the gentling process.

During the first year, the government retains title to the animal(s), and will conduct compliance checks throughout the year in an effort to ensure as much as possible that the animal is properly being cared for and has gone to a good home. At the end of the first year, if the adopter has complied with all the adoption stipulations and has properly cared for their mustang or burro for one year, he or she is eligible to receive title, or ownership, from the Federal government.

The BLM has placed nearly 225,000 wild horses and burros into private care since the adoption program began in 1971. To apply to adopt a wild horse or burro on-line, please go to the BLM's adoption website at:

http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/What_We_Do/wild_horse_and_burro0.html.

If you are interested in adopting directly from one of the BLM's holding facilities, please visit the agency's facilities page. For more information about the BLM's Adopt-A-Horse or Burro program, please visit http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro.html, or you may call 1-866-4Mustangs (468-7826) with any questions about the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.